DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 296 055 UD 026 258

AUTHOR Geary, Patricia A.
TITLE "Defying the Odds?": Academic Success Among At-Risk Minority Teenagers in an Urban High School.
SPONS AGENCY National Center on Effective Secondary Schools, Madison, WI.
PUB DATE 9 Apr 88
NOTE 42p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New Orleans, LA, April 5-9, 1988).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; Administrator Attitudes; *Black Students; College Preparation; Educationally Disadvantaged; *High Achievement; High Risk Students; High Schools; *High School Students; Inner City; Self Actualization; *Student Attitudes; Student Evaluation of Teacher Performance; *Teacher Attitudes; *Urban Education
IDENTIFIERS Positive Attitudes

ABSTRACT

This study investigated what factors in the experiences of black, inner-city 10th and 11th graders enabled them to succeed in spite of the often debilitating factors and circumstances that surrounded them. Interviews with students, teachers, and administrators at an urban all-black high school selected by the National Center on Effective Secondary Schools revealed the following: (1) for teachers, academic success is based primarily on a student's "positive attitude" as well as his or her ability to "work hard." The responsibility for a student's academic success or failure lies in the student's actions and behaviors; (2) the college preparatory students generally agreed with their teachers that a good attitude and a willingness to work hard are necessary for academic success. They also found other factors important, such as self-confidence, class participation, extra-curricular activities, social flexibility, friendliness and humility, and self-motivation; (3) students believe that their teachers have a responsibility to be competent, to instruct them, to abide by the general principles of respect and fairness, and to learn to adjust to the student's individual needs. They want curricula that relate to their values and heritage. Three tables and figures illustrate some of the data. A short list of references is included. (BJV)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

7-12-88

ED296055

"Defying the Odds?": Academic Success Among At-Risk Minority Teenagers in an Urban High School

Patricia A. Geary

Georgia State University
College of Education
University Plaza
Atlanta, GA 30303

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Patricia A. Geary
Georgia State Univ.

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Division G, Session G-45, New Orleans, LA, April 9, 1988.

This study was partially funded through the auspices of the National Center on Effective Secondary Schools, School of Education, University of Wisconsin-Madison. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations are those of the author.

UD026258

INTRODUCTION

Recent literature has cited and explained the three dominant theories on minority education, namely, cultural deprivation, genetic deficit, and culture conflict. These "deficit theories" were originally generated to describe the underlying reasons for the apparent failure of minority students to succeed in educational settings. While these theories did offer some general predictions, as well as statistical and correlational data, these perspectives have been examined and dismissed as inadequate because they not only failed to offer pertinent insights regarding the education of minorities, but also tended to stereotype groups while they viewed disparities in cognitive and linguistic behaviors with a biased eye. In addition, these methodologies failed to take into account that all students create <u>their own culture</u> within school (and outside of educational institutions) and that these cultures have a great deal to do with academic outcomes. Therefore, a holistic view of a groups's <u>own</u> meanings is crucial to accurate understanding and, if deemed necessary and appropriate, to the subsequent establishing of intervention methods.

Ethnography, a methodological procedure with roots

in the traditions of cultural anthropology and American sociology, has become increasingly utilized among educational researchers particularly during the last two decades. This type of research has been defined in various ways. The definition best suited here is that of Geertz who borrowed the term from the philosopher Gilbert Ryle. Geertz describes ethnography as the holistic "thick description" of the interactive processes in a culture (1973, p. 6). This involves the discovery of important and recurring variables as they relate to one another and as they affect or produce certain results and outcomes.

Due in part to the recent educational reform movement, ethnographic studies of education and educational institutions have already been conducted. Studies of minority education have received special thrust, thereby expanding available knowledge in such areas as values, language use, family structures, patterns of social interaction, and behavior patterns minority students, particularly Blacks, bring with them to their schools. However, as the reform movement began to take shape at local levels, Black educators warned that:

> current efforts fail to recognize the barriers facing Black students and do not address the "crumbling infrastructure" of black education. (Snider, 1986, p. 1)

These educators cautioned that instruction must not only be culturally relevant if it to meet the needs of black students, but it also must recognize the barriers to academic success facing Blacks. As Charles Thomas, president of the National Alliance of Black School Educators noted:

> People assume that Blacks will be taken care of if everything else is in place, but I don't think that's going to happen. I think it will be business as usual, and a significant number of African-Americans will continue to fall through the cracks. (in Snider, 1986, p. 16)

RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

Despite some reforms and as rich as recent educational research has been, minority students, urban at-risk Blacks in particular, continue to fail and to drop-out of schools in record numbers, the drop-out rate reaching more than 50% in some urban metropolitan areas (Wehlage, 1986). ["At-risk" used here is defined as students with serious socio-economic and/or personal problems which often lead other students in similar circumstances to drop out of school (Wehlage, 1986).] The reasons for the staggering minority drop-out figures and rampant failure are many. Perhaps at the core is school personnel's general lack of knowledge concerning these students and the students' own culture. Furthermore, perhaps educators do not sufficiently understand how the dynamic interacting strands of

teachers, administrators, peers, environments, rules, expectations, and pressures influence student behavior and academic outcomes. Clark (1983) stated that before this veil of misunderstanding can be raised, myths and beliefs about urban students will have to be explained (p. 212).

METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN OF THE STUDY

In order to attempt to clarify these understandings and to supplement and expand previous research, an ethnographic study was initiated which concerned itself with unraveling the complexity of the whole by studying the culture of a group of black, academically successful inner-city adolescents from the vantage point of the culture itself. Rather than concentrating on the causes and effects of students' failure, this study investigated high school adolescents who had managed to "defy the odds" and succeed in spite of the often debilitating factors and circumstances which surround them. The methodology chosen for the study incorporates the specific students', teachers', administrators', and school system personnel's situations, experiences, and perceptions about schooling, as well as how these individuals ordinarily function and behave in school settings, into the data gathering and analytic procedures of the study. Rich, detailed data were gathered based on non-participant and participant

observation, the collecting and stenographic recording of detailed fieldnotes, informal and formal interviews (most audio recorded), the amassing of school and system archival and historical records, as well as the collecting of artifacts, informant journals, school system documents, demographic data, and public records. This kind of data collection obviously requires the researcher's prolonged immersion in the field, as well as the constant adjustment of the view, the use of multiple lenses, and, for the purposes of this study, the drawing into focus of the students' experience of schooling.

STUDY SITE SELECTION AND SETTING

The site was selected by the National Center on Effective Secondary Schools, University of Wisconsin-Madison, as part of a multi-site national study. *Lincoln High School came to the attention of the National Center because it had received some recognition from the community and press for its innovative programs aimed at at-risk black youth.

This study, conducted from August, 1986, to March, 1988, centers primarily on a group of at-risk tenth and eleventh grade (in 1986-1987) college prep students at

*In order to ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms are used throughout this paper in place of actual proper names.

Lincoln High School. Lincoln is an all-black inner-city high school (grades 8-12) with a student population of approximately 650 and a 60 member faculty which is 95% black. Located in a major southern center,Lincoln is embedded in an area where the inhabitants are politically and economically marginalized. Symptoms of this marginalization are clearly evident...high unemployment, low income, limited educational attainment, alarming teenage pregnancy rates, high infant mortality, and rampant crime.

The area immediately surrounding the school is comprised of a sprawling 900+ unit, forty-year-old government housing project where the majority of Lincoln's students reside. In contrast to these clustered tiny red two-story brick rowhouses, the project's periphery is dotted with modest single wooden frame homes peopled mostly by aged Blacks who decided to remain "after the young people moved out after integration" (I-T WP 5.19.2). (See Table 1 for citation key). The surrounding area also contains apartments, tiny shotgun houses, and once-stately Victorian homes now carved up into boarding rooms. In addition, vacant properties interspersed through the neighborhood serve as surreptitious play zones for the area's children or as gathering places for drug dealers.

Table 1

Key to Data Citation References

Code		Meaning
	INTERVIEWS	
I A W (1) (2) (3)	1.	Interview
	2.	A-Administrator T-Teacher H-Student (10th grade) J-Student (11th grade) O-Student (12th grade) p-Parent
	3.	Individual Code
I-T 11.5.3 (1) (2)	1.	Interview - audio taped
	2.	Month/day/transcript page
	FIELDNOTES	
FN 9.23.3 (1) (2)	1.	Fieldnotes
	2.	Month/day/typed page
E or J (1) (2)	1.	Essay
	2.	Journal entry
	DOCUMENTS	
Art		Article
Artf		Artifact

Lincoln High School is part of a school system that is over 90% black in a city which has a majority black population. The area has had its share of racial strife, particularly in the 60s. Today, however, its citizens proudly note that civil rights are engrained in the city's legacy. In addition, the area's political leaders are black as are many of the city's entrepreneurs.

STUDENT SELECTION

The students in the study were selected during the previous scholastic year (1985-1986) as participants in a newly-formed "college preparatory program" called "Expanded Horizons." The stated purpose of the program was to bring these students together to "motivate each other" and to "help over-all...test scores, their image, and their outlook" (I AN 8.27.2; I-T AW 10.8.3). Students were selected based primarily on teacher recommendations because Lincoln school officials felt that they could not "use test scores as an absolute determiner" as Lincoln students "don't do well on standardized tests--from the SAT down or the SFST (State Fundamental Skills Test) up" (I-T AW 10.8.3; FN 8.27.2; 10.22.1; 10.27.1). Therefore, if an individual teacher saw potential in a student, even if that student had not passed the SFST or did poor work in class, that individual was asked to be part of the program. "No

student was automatically excluded" based on his/her test scores or course grades; however, it was determined by a faculty committee that pupils selected for the program place in the 60th percentile or above in mathematics and the 50th percentile or above in reading on a standardized measure of achievement (I-T AW 10.8.3). Nonetheless, a school counselor stated, "Any student could be college bound (prep) who wanted to be...I'm not going to deprive a child of trying. It could be my child or yours. They could be late bloomers" (I AW 10.29.1). As a result, a number of the chosen or self-selected students did not meet the original standardized mathematics and reading test requirements. Furthermore, during the course of the initial year of operation, additional students became part of the program while others dropped out or were removed. The remaining 35 college prep students, who were channeled into such classes as Spanish, Trigonometry, Calculus, Physics, Chemistry, and Advanced English, became the focus of this ethnographic investigation.

"Defying the Odds?"

After gaining entry in August, 1986, I began the research by spending three days a week on campus. This continued for the first three months. With notebook and tape recorder in hand, I visited and observed classes,

often following a college prep student for an entire morning or afternoon session. I talked and interviewed students and teachers before and after classes and generally "hung around." Occasionally, verbatim conversations between and among students were recorded due to a facility with Gregg shorthand. These and other varied interactions and methods resulted in "thick" descriptive accounts.

Ongoing qualitative analysis was performed on both the observational and the transcribed data using a method analogous to analytic induction, called "constitutive ethnography" by Mehan (1975). In this procedure an initial analytic scheme is generated from a small piece of data, new data is continually applied, and the scheme is modified until a final scheme is generated.

Through our encounters, my attendance at school functions and extracurricular events, I came to know many students and they came to know me. Faculty meetings, administrative council sessions, and assemblies of the local ministerial and social service agencies were attended.

During the next three months, two to three days a week, I continued to observe and talk with students, teachers, and administrators. Formal interviews were conducted with all college prep students and their

teachers. Where possible, these interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed. During this time I also became a participant, tutoring small groups of students, setting up and serving for school and community action group meetings, accompanying students on local field trips, and assisting the school's academic bowl coach in preparing students for televised appearances. All of these activities put me in close contact with students and staff.

The remainder of the school year was spent in a continuation of these activities. Additional contact was sought with parents and older members of the community. Further, I had the unique opportunity of interviewing a Lincoln teacher's parents who have been active members of the Lincoln community for over seventy years. They offered remarkable background data.

During the summer months I remained in contact with a few of the students and their parents. In one case, I assumed a sig nificant role in assisting a recently graduated student-informant as she prepared to enter a local private college.

Fall of 1987 found me back at Lincoln. Data collection continued; however, it was more focused based on the analysis completed to that date. All college prep students were formally interviewed again.

Research Findings

Results of the preliminary analysis of the ethnographic data (analysis continues) indicated, among other findings, that teachers and students differed in their understandings of success and how best it is achieved. The following is an explication of the teacher perspective and the student perspective on academic success at Lincoln. In addition, a concluding section will focus on students' views of what qualities constitute the "good" teacher.

College Prep Teachers' Perspective

To teachers, academic success, as evidenced in better than average grades, is based primarily on a student's "positive attitude" as well as his or her ability to "work hard." Indeed, more campus discussion at Lincoln revolves around attitude than it does on math or science or literature. One teacher commented:

> Students in this class might get a D or an F but not in the college prep class. They catch on quicker...they have a more positive attitude. (I TC 11.5.3)

Another teacher remarked, "Some of the test problems has [sic] to do with negative attitudes" (FN AN 12.3.10).

Positive attitude. According to teachers, students display a positive attitude when they respect others, come to class prepared, volunteer for in-class and out-of-class assignments, and "know how to play the

school game" (FN 9.12.5; 10.21.2; I TA 12.4.2). In addition, goal-setting, the ability to verbalize, effort (as perceived by teachers), and a serious demeanor are all qualities of those pupils regarded by teachers as possessing a positive attitude (FN 9.23.3; 10.29.1; 1.15.3; I TV 10.14.5; I HV 1.27.8; I TT 2.24.2).

A positive attitude at Lincoln has a great deal to do with self-control and demeanor, that is "knowing how to act," or "acting like a gentlemen or lady." These qualities are stressed so much that three school organizations have specifically been inaugurated to address these and other areas, including deportment, table manners, and how to function as an "upwardly mobile person" (Artf 6.3.3; 8.27.4).

Despite teachers' remarks regarding a student's relative freedom to self-select college prep program participation, having a positive attitude is also central to a student's very inclusion in the program and, in contrast to standard curriculum classes, even more behavioral demands are made on college prep members. Some students resist. Peter Craxton, a sophomore (1986-1987) says he is "getting out" (of college prep classes). He remarks, "Every time you do something, they say, 'And you're supposed to be a college prep student'" (I-T HX 12.1.2).

Peter is seen by most of his teachers as lacking a positive attitude because he occasionally sleeps in class, fails to bring in all required assignments, and questions the establishment. For example, during a brief teacher lecture on the importance of the National Honor Society, Peter commented, "Why would you want to be on the National Honor Society? What is in it for the students?" (FN HX 11.17.4). Peter's words were interpreted by his teacher as further indication of his negative view of school.

Lincoln High School's teachers single out individual students whom they feel display a positive attitude. These pupils are called upon to participate in numerous school activities such as assemblies, ceremonies, field trips, and visits by local, state, and/or national dignitaries. One such student is Steven Michaels.

Student Profile: Steven Michaels

Steven, a college prep junior (1986-1987), is articulate, friendly, outgoing, and poised. Regarded as a leader by his teachers and his peers, he is well-liked and ranks academically in the upper 7 to 8 percent of his class. His participation in the school's ROTC program is the fulfillment of a personal dream as Steven wants to attend one of the military academies; however,

his SAT score of 770 is more than 400 points below what Steven indicates as the score necessary for entrance.

While actively involved in school activities, Steven laments the fact that he is too involved because regular participation interferes with his class attendance as practice periods are held during school hours. Occasionally his punctuated or irregular attendance has resulted in poor grades. He comments, "I got a 'D' in English...I'm doing too many things. I won't get another one" (I JM 4.7.2). Steven's "D" in English was a rare event because most often he receives "A's" and "B's" even though he is tardy or absent from class more often than he is on time or present. These tardies and absences, however, are not recorded by teachers because Steven is involved in school activities and is, therefore, not responsible for the lost time. In addition, when class tests or quizzes are given and missed, Steven usually arranges to return at lunch time or after school to make them up, thereby gaining a time advantage on his classmates.

When asked how students achieve an "A" at Lincoln, Steven responded:

> Attendance and behavior are important and you need a good attitude...Even if you got all "A's" in class and you fooled around, you might get a "B." You wouldn't get an "A." Teachers have to know you're trying. (I JM 2.3.4)

Steven is a prime example of good attitude resulting in good grades. His willingness to participate, coupled with his competitive spirit, rugged determination, self-motivation, good looks, and charm have resulted in his academic success at Lincoln. Even his occasional in-class suggestions about how teachers might re-organize and improve the curriculum are accepted without reprimand (FN 10.1.2). There is an obvious discrepancy between the lack of response given by Steven Michael's teacher and the response given to Peter Craxton by his instructor--the former student possessing a good attitude while the latter a "negative" one.

Hard work. In addition to good attitude, "hard work" is a requirement teachers view as important for achieving success at Lincoln. A school counselor has stated that hard work means a student is trying; that he/she is making the effort. This, in turn, breeds success (FN AW 10.19.1).

To encourage students further, Lincoln teachers have stated policies regarding effort. Some indicate that a certain percentage of the student's course grade will reflect the student's persistence and determination. "When pupils do poorly on report cards, it is because they didn't try," stated one teacher (FN

TE 2.10.5). This is the opinion held by most college prep teachers at Lincoln.

Not all college prep teachers, however, agree with the emphasis on good attitude. While they feel students need a positive outlook, they do not concur that attitude should impact grades. One teacher has said:

> Candla is studying hard, but I don't feel she's all that bright. I think the A's she's gotten in the past might be due to the fact that Candla has a good attitude about school. (I TA 12.4.2)

An ancillary element of the good attitude/hard work requirement is the rewarding of students for substandard achievement. When students are performing below level or they present teachers with partially completed and/or partially correct assignments, and they manifest those attributes of "trying" which are deemed appropriate by the teacher(s), the students are rewarded with teacher praise for a job well done and/or are given grades which are more a reflection of their effort than they are of their knowledge or increased achievement. The majority of teachers do not communicate that while a student's effort is appreciated, he/she does not have the correct response or does not display adequate understanding of a particular concept. In addition, because Lincoln ranks students according to their grade point average, this indicates that a student does well only in comparison to

another who does not do as well or who does not try as hard.

Summary

According to a majority of college prep teachers at Lincoln, students' academic success or failure is a result of the students' actions, or in the case of what are deemed inappropriate behaviors, the students non-alignment with such behaviors. Teachers view and reward the outwardly responsible, diligent student while they often criticize pupils who are unwilling to work consistently and independently or who persist in distracting other class members. Furthermore, teachers do not view students' lack of success as a reflection on them, their beliefs, their knowledge, or their pedagogical techniques. Teachers do not indicate that their expectations of students, time spent on lesson preparation, instruction, classroom innovations, positive teacher-teacher and teacher-student interaction, willingness to participate in staff meetings, workshops, and extra curricular activities have any significant impact on students' academic success. Moreover, they give little if any verbal and/or behavioral manifestation of their acceptance of responsibility for student achievement. According to the teachers at Lincoln, academic success or failure rests solely with the individual student and his/her

good attitude and willingness to work hard. Indeed, to the college prep teachers at Lincoln, the components they view as necessary for students' success have become ends rather than means to success. They have become the focal point for evaluation rather than students' knowledge or academic growth.

College Prep Students' Perspective

The college prep students at Lincoln generally agree with their teachers concerning the necessity for a good attitude and the willingness to work hard as keys to academic success (See Figure 1). During their school years, they have learned these requirements and consciously or unconsciously have chosen to accept them. Hevania Arnold, a tenth grader (1986-1987) says, "Having a positive attitude about things helps you succeed at Lincoln...you can make it if you try hard" (I HH 12.8.5). "You just have to work," declares Senora Crawford, a fellow classmate. Senora continues, "You have to concentrate...Don't be involved in too many things at one time. It poses a problem..." (I-T JC 1.5.2). Another tenth grader notes, "There are times when I have gone to class with the wrong attitude but, when I leave my class, I am set straight" (E HI 5.5.6). Further, Bernice Arenas, a junior (1986-1987), defines a good attitude as:

> participating in class projects or class assignments; having a good grade point average

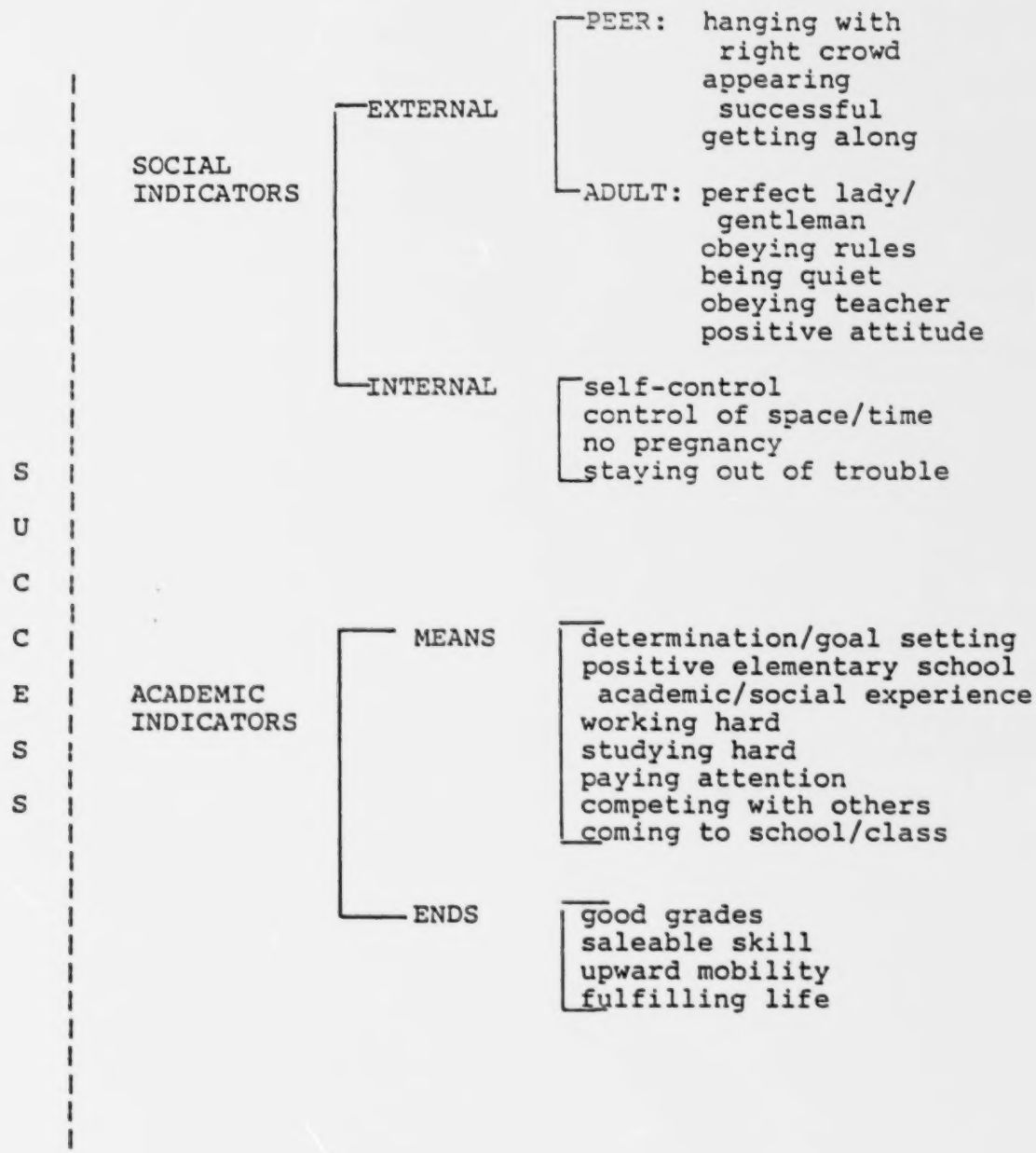

Figure 1. Success at Lincoln High School: Student/ Adult Perspectives.

> and making good grades. If you make good grades and have a good grade point average and you're popular with the teacher...everybody wants to know you. (I-T JA 1.5.3).

As Bernice indicates, there is more involved in academic success than a good attitude and working hard. "Good grades," (not necessarily good test scores) "determination," "inner drive," "being the best," and "getting recognition," are also integral components for achieving academic success at Lincoln. In addition, students consider "being the teacher's pet" and "doing what teachers give you" as sure ways to succeed. However, they do not feel that all rules need be obeyed, particulary those they feel are intended to control and/or manipulate them. Further, they generally agree that deference to teachers is necessary except in instances where they believe teachers are wrong. In these cases, they emphasize that students need to express their displeasure by reporting the problem to the proper school authority.

Angela Wilson, a tenth grader (1986-1987), reveals in her essay:

> Most students exceeds [sic] at Lincoln by being friendly with the faculty members...they can easily pass a class by becoming close to their teacher. If they get close to a teacher, the grade is easily [sic] to get. (E HW 5.5.2)

Angela also sees participating in auxiliaries, clubs, and other activities as means to success. Furthermore,

she states that conduct plays a significant role as does the student's own "striving for the top" (I HW 12.8.2).

Another tenth grader, Claire Spencer, sees success in another light. To Claire, pregnant with her first child, success is returning to school after the baby is born.

> Just because I'm pregnant, I don't see any reason to drop out. It's stupid to drop out. I didn't want it (baby) now, but since I'm carrying it, I do want it. (I-T HS 12.8.3)

Most students agree with Claire's response. To them, pregnancy is merely an interruption, not the end of a young woman's education.

Along with Claire Spencer, Cletus Anthony ranks in the top 10 percent of his class. Classified by the school system as a gifted tenth grader (1986-1987), Cletus explains that students can achieve and do well at Lincoln "by showing up and by doing their homework" (I-T 12.8.1). These actions, he emphasizes, should get any student "at least a 'C'" (I-T 12.8.1).

Cynthia Lake, a classmate, agrees; however, she finds attendance as the core of learning. She elaborates, "The more you come to school, the more you learn. The more you learn, the more you will advance. This leads to success" (E HL 5.6.5).

Not unlike her fellow students, junior (1986-1987) Candla Brown, deems independence and "believing in yourself" as crucial to academic success. She says:

> It's not hard. All you have to do is your homework and put your best into it...I know I can; I think I can; and I can...You got to believe in yourself no matter what these other people think around here. (I-T JB 12.15.2)

Another junior (1986-1987), Felicia Thomas, believes success is achieved by:

> working toward it; not playing the "game"; following directions; coping with situations; displaying good conduct; and, having strong determination. (I-T JF 1.19.2)

Gil Fielding, an honor student, agrees with Felicia. He thinks anyone can be successful who "comes in and tries hard everyday...If you do this, I don't see no [sic] teacher will ever fail you" (I JG 12.15.6). Gil continues:

> It ain't so much it's brains. It's effort. Everybody's got the brains to do whatever they want to do. It's just effort that you put into it. You don't put nothing in there, you can't get nothing out. (I-T JG 12.15.6)

Gil also attributes his academic success to some caring teachers "who make you want to work" as well as to the nurturing and encouragement he receives from his grandparents, with whom he lives (J JG 1). A teacher agrees and notes that the Fieldings periodically come to Lincoln to check on Gil "and to check on the teachers, too" (FN TT 1.15.2). In addition, Gil Fielding regards the social environment as an impetus for his success.

> In Lincoln's environment, you have more determined people who come from poor or middle class families who want to be better than their parents or who want to be part of the high class society; whereas, people who are already at the

> high class level have nowhere else to go but down. (J JG 10)

> You have to be physically and mentally tough to succeed at Lincoln. I say this because there are many things constantly going on around us like fights, stealing, gambling, and other things. Upon graduating from Lincoln and knowing that you have successfully fought off all of these negative things, you realize that you have succeeded. You also realize that you have the makings of a successful person. (E JG 5.5.2)

Ranked at the top of his class for the last three years, Gil Fielding prides himself on being successful although he notes, "It's nice to know the people behind you that are second, third, and fourth could have been first also. It ain't no big thing being first" (I-T JG 12.15.5). To Gil, being first is a matter of trying hard, putting forth the effort, and having someone behind him pushing him to succeed. At no time does Gil Fielding indicate that academic success is in any way related to knowledge of specific curricular content. Rather, he defines success as getting good grades and this is achieved through persistance, determination, and consistant effort.

Javine Easley, a popular college prep junior (1986-1987) has a different opinion. She believes a student's lack of success may be a direct result of teachers' low expectations and not necessarily a pupil's lack of effort. She elaborates:

> There are some things they think we can do and there are some things they think we can't

> do, and I know I get tired of hearing, "They're black kids and they can't read well and they can't count as well." And it really makes me feel depressed because they're not giving us a chance--to let us prove it--'cause we can do it if we're given the opportunity. (I-T JE 12.15.2)

While she feels Orientals are given the opportunity to succeed, Javine believes most Blacks are not. Furthermore, she thinks some teachers at Lincoln have high expectations of their students, but many do not. "By being here five years, I know some of them don't care...Maybe I'm expecting too much" (I-T JE 12.15.3).

Sharing Javine's concern, Farlanda Tevett, a sophomore (1986-1987) is angry because she feels students should not get grades merely for attending classes. She remarks:

> If I'm going to get an "A," I want to earn my "A"...It makes me mad in a way. As I get old enough to send my children through school, I don't want them to sit there and listen to the teacher. I want them to earn their "A". (I-T 12.10.1)

Hobart Reeves, a bright, soft-spoken college prep sophomore (1986-1987) cites the following as means to success at Lincoln:

> comming [sic] to class; being on task; studying hard; being quiet; speaking only when being spoken too [sic] or asking a question; looking as if you are interested in your work; and, getting along with others. (E HV 5.6.1-3

With regard to the later point, Hobart writes:

> When students get along with each other, it reduces any comotions [sic]. Without any comotions, the teacher can finish their [sic]

> job and don't raise their blood pressure because of uncalled for fighting and argument. (E HV 5.6.1-3)

Hobart believes school is a place for learning and that teachers should not be lenient and permit students to "slide by" because "when they get to college, they can't do it" (I-T HV 12.8.2).

Attending college and majoring in industrial arts are Hobart's dreams. He wants to teach, inspired early by a teacher of the subject he encountered at Lincoln, a teacher he found to be caring, understanding, and knowledgeable. Hobart feels motivated, too, by a young Lincoln graduate uncle of his who now struggles to pass his courses at a nearby state university (I HV 12.8.2-3).

Because of this future career direction and his present low socio-economic status, Hobart is intent on learning as much as he can in order to win a scholarship to a local college; however, he sees his current (1987-1988) social studies teacher as a real obstacle to the fulfillment of his dreams. He feels the instructor "does not teach" any new course content only repetitiously reviews what students have learned previously or asks students to fill out what he feels are purposeless sheets on topics covered in former years. Hobart has spoken to both his counselor and the teacher concerning the matter. The counselor, in turn,

met with the teacher and requested that a challenging individualized learning plan be developed for Hobart. More than two months after the meeting, the matter had still not been resolved. In addition, the only significant change noted by Hobart was his recruitment by the teacher in question to "teach" those in the class who were experiencing difficulty with the course content (I HV 12.8.1-3).

In brief, in this particular class, Hobart Reeves feels cheated. He has high expectations of and for himself. He only wishes his social studies teacher did also.

Hobart's classmate and an honor student, Walchesa Green, grants that success is possible at Lincoln for those who are "quiet," who "study a lot," and who "are nice to teachers (I-T HG 12.10.5). She also says that "good teachers don't give you a grade if you don't earn it." To Walchesa, "good teachers" insist on student mastery of required course content not simply students' "good attitudes, attendance, and being quiet." She insists, "Even though I don't like going into her [a person Walchesa regards as a 'good teacher'] class, later on I'll probably thank them [sic]" (I-T HG 12.10.5). To this young student "learning something" is real success.

Another sophomore interested in learning is Jannine Erhard. Jannine ranks academically in the top ten percent of her class. According to her counselor, Jannine:

> wants to participate in anything that can help her to achieve. "What's my GPA and rank?" are always on her mind...she is very conscientious...out-going, aggressive--an achiever. I'm impressed with how happy she is--always smiling with something good to say... She feels good about herself. Personal fulfillment seems to be her source of motivation that has been reinforced by her family, friends, and teachers. (J AC re: HJ 11.19.1; 12.2.1; 1.15.1; 3.18.1)

Jannine states that her parents are her role models. "They worked hard and moved out of this area...to a house," she says. She continues, "I want to make it...to finish college...I want to go forward...I don't want to stay back...This takes a lot of school" (I HJ 12.8.1).

To Jannine academic success at Lincoln requires "being present and being on time, trying hard, and studying." It also demands that students "understand" what is being taught. Above all, to Jannine, success is for those who "really want it" (I HJ 12.8.3).

Pamela Thomas, an honor roll eleventh grader (1986-1987), adds two other significant components to the success issue. First, she and others indicate that they got their "good start" in elementary school. Pamela declares:

> I think you need a good start in elementary school. That's where I got mine at Drake. I had good teachers and a good principal. That's where I got my good start at. (I-T JP 12.15.8)

Second, Pamela voices concern over some students who persist in making fun of those who want to succeed. She says:

> Sometimes when people see a person going to the library or reading, they make fun of them. I'm not saying that you should stay in your books all the time. There are other ways of learning, but since you're here, make the best of it. Don't fool around. (I-T JP 12.15.4)

Pamela says some students do not do their work in order to avoid the name "nerd," a person whom others view as "smart." "That makes me sad," Pamela remarks, "and I want to come back (after graduation) to Lincoln to speak" (I-T JP 12.15.4).

A college prep tenth grader (1986-1987), Chuck Rutger, concurs with Pamela. "Being good in academics gains the respect of the teachers but not your peers," he writes (E HR 5.6.1). He claims, moreover, that a student's facility in athletics is the key to popularity with other Lincoln attendees. Further explaining in an essay, Chuck writes:

> When a student has an excellent ability to achieve and excel, that student is considered to be a"nerd" to his/her peers, but to the faculty the student is looked upon as having a gift; therefore, the teacher began [sic] to respect that student...Good athletes gain the respect of their peers. Many students believe that a good athlete is a gift of God to the school. I guess the reason for this

> is because, in the educational arena, students judge a school not by its academic record, but by the schools sports [sic] record as well...When one is good in both sports and academics, he gains the respect of both his/her peers and teachers...When that particular student is good in sports, his/her peers believe that he/she is a "cool" person...when a student is good in both, not only is he/she a "cool" fellow, he/she also has what it takes to make it. (E HR 5.6.2-5)

To Chuck, success in school is two-pronged. It demands academic excellence in order to gain the respect and admiration of teachers and, because Chuck views the peer-descriptor "nerd" unacceptable, he feels a counter-balance is necessary--athletic prowess and the recognition it brings.

Summary

Lincoln High School's college prep students generally agree with their teachers that a good attitude and diligent effort are needed for academic success. However, they see them as only two of many basic components. They add such characteristics as believing in themselves; participating in class and in extra-curricular activities, particularly athletics; coping with a variety of situations and individuals; being friendly and deferential to all, especially teachers; possessing interior motivation and determination; and, being the best. They see academic success, below average standardized test results notwithstanding, as possible, indeed, as crucial if

their dreams of fulfilling lives, interesting careers, good wages, and better living conditions are to be realized. Further, they see the motivation and the desire for success as something learned, not inborn, as best developed early, but, if not, always at the edge of possibility. These students know from their own experiences which factors contribute to success and which do not (See Figure 2).

Lincoln's college prep students know success is not a commodity, contained in simple strict adherence to external school rules because they understand learning and good behavior are not synonymous. They do know that the world in which they reside does not always view attitude and effort as success-generators.

Success for these college prep members, therefore, is the way they are treated <u>now</u>. It is teachers interacting and working with them not simply <u>doing</u> something to or for them. It is an educational curriculum that is real-world based, not teacher or system contrived.

Success for these young people is the measure of independence they are given <u>now</u>. It is an atmosphere where they are free to explore options and ideas. It is an environment where they can interact with others.

Success for these adolescents is the encouragement and stimulation they are given <u>now</u>. It is an arena

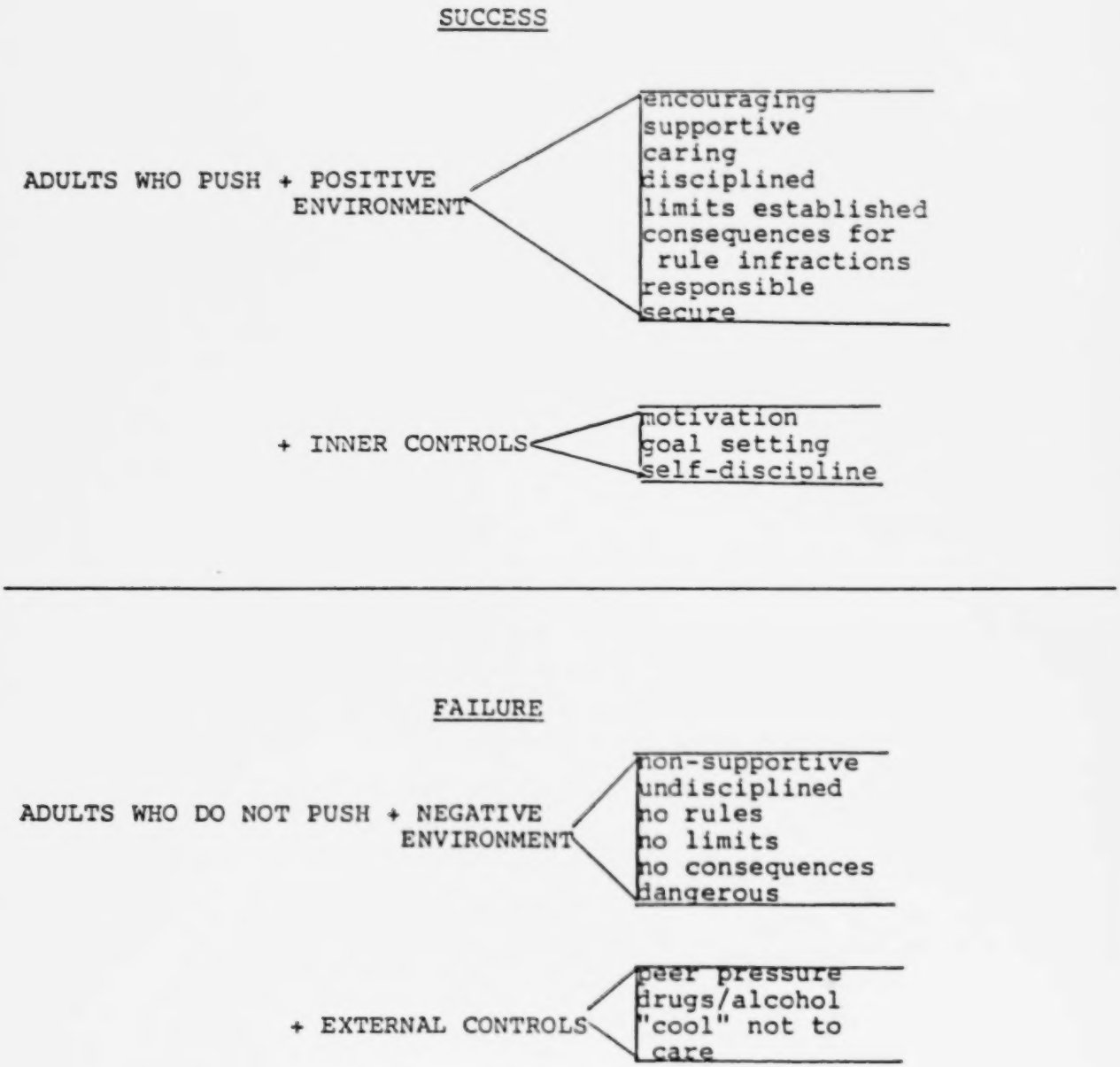

Figure 2. Success or Failure? Students' View.

where they and their heritage are cherished and respected. It is a place where real people help to shape real people.

To these college prep students, academic success is a many-tiered phenomenon in which teachers play a vital part. Because of this intense teacher-role, these adolescents expend enormous daily energy discussing "good" and "bad" teachers and the impact they have on their lives. Because of its import, the following section will offer a glimpse into their conversations concerning teachers and the qualities they feel distinguish the "good" from the "bad."

The "Good" Teacher: Students' Definition

The thirty-five college prep students investigated in this study have definite views concerning "good" and "bad" teachers. Their views can be divided into two major areas: interpersonal relations and professional competence.

In general, these pupils see their teachers as professionals possessing superordinate status within the school because of their age, competence, and authority within the setting. Because of this recognized status, students are willing to extend the proper deference; however, they expect, in return, respect for them as persons and as learners. They do not feel that they are qualitatively different from teachers, merely younger.

College prep students feel that their teachers should relate well to young people. They define this quality as the ability to get along with them, to listen to what they have to say without being intrusive, to take them seriously, to be present to them, to understand, to help, to care, and to laugh with them (I-T HC 10.29.1; I-T HJ 12.8.4; I-T HK 12.8.3; I-T HM 12.10.4; I-T HW 12.8.2; I JE 12.7.2; I JH 11.5.1; I-T JM 12.15.4; I-T JR 1.5.4).

In matters relating to teacher-student interaction and classroom discipline, they admit that teachers have the right to admonish them for what the teacher may consider inappropriate behavior. However, they argue that there may be a perfectly legitimate reason for the student to act as he/she does. It is the teacher's task, they believe, to ascertain the reason for the student's misbehavior and to respond <u>from</u> this knowledge rather than simply <u>to</u> the behavior. During a discussion on teachers, Farlanda Tevette and Javine Easley respectively comment:

> Some people are just down on your back. They're not really listening to you. They're fussing saying, "You should know better." Mostly adults don't really understand teenagers ...when it comes down to drugs for instance. They don't know the reason why this teenager got on drugs. It could have been peer pressure, or it could have been a lot of reasons why... they need to understand the reasons so they can help. (I-T HT 12.10.3)

> We have good teachers, but one thing I think

> they lack is that they don't have patience enough sometimes. They fail to realize that everybody isn't the same...and there are an awful lot of people out there who don't expect black kids to do well. (I-T JE 12.7.2)

In addition to relating to young people, Lincoln's college prep students feel that teachers need to be academically and pedagogically competent. Students test and challenge teachers to ascertain whether or not they have the skills to act as professionals and as agents of the school's goals. If students perceive that a teacher or teachers lack the ability to represent and further the goals of the system and the school, these teachers, in turn, lose their right to demand and receive the students' acquiescence. The following pupils comment on their experiences with one teacher:

> We never read a story on our own. (TF) reads it to us or has a tape...and in fifteen minutes half the class is asleep. It's boring...The kids run the class more than (TF) does....I haven't learned one thing all year....All we do mostly is worksheets...and they're eighth grade level.... I miss (TC)'s class, come in the next day, take a quiz, and still pass. (TC) needs to get the students involved. (I-T HR 12.10.3-4)

> (TC)'s too easy. Students take advantage... (I-T HW 12.8.1)

> There are lots of crazy people in there (class).... (TC)'s just too nice. (I-T HC 12.8.2)

> I can't hear in that class...They don't want to listen....(TC) be [sic] talking a lot on what it will be like outside. (I-T HD 12.8.2)

Other college prep class members voice differing opinions about their teachers. They explain:

(TC) knows how to teach...(TC) goes step-by-step so you can understand and (TM) just fly [sic] through it and won't give time...says (TM) already taught us...but, we haven't had it before...Now (TC) really gets you to work... (TC) will go over it until you understand it and you can come after school for help...(TM) will tell some people not to come after school because (TM) doesn't like them or their attitude. (I-T JF 1.5.3)

We have lots to do, but (TE) makes sure you understand...(TC) will make you understand, too....(TT) is a good teacher, but I guess (TT)'s running around...and stuff...(TT) [sic] kind of behind this year. We have been on the same thing for a long time. (I-T JG 12.15.5-6)

There are very few teachers who will sit down with the students and explain and explain until they get it. Some might do it, but you get the impression that they are bored....Maybe I'm expecting too much. I think that they think they can get away with doing a lot of things they couldn't do if they were teaching rich kids or well-off kids...and that makes me mad....(TO) cares and explains and will help. With other teachers, you have to make it on your own....It's real hard to be around people that don't expect anything from you. It's even harder when they're black and you're black. I hate to say this but sometimes we expect it from other races; we expect them to think that we can't do this and we can't do that, but it's hard when you run into somebody that's black and that has made something of himself and they think they're better than you. (I-T JE 12.7.4-5)

I don't think they teach you anything at this school. There are certain teachers that will teach you something. (TO), she makes sure you get your work. (TO) know [sic] how to teach a class...We had to get up in the front of the class...(TO) will come in the class and start the assignment...and we work until the end of the class. In other teachers' classes, we just come in there and the teacher be [sic] out of class. They don't even come into the class and teach...they probably go to the office or something. They say they was [sic] working on papers...(TO) gets down to it, but most of the

> teachers, they don't do that. They don't really do nothing....(TD) don't hardly never [sic] come into class and teach. (TD) will come once in awhile. I believe (TD) be [sic] in (TD)'s office...some kids don't care. I care. I want to learn something. It don't [sic] seem like I learn anything...there are just certain classes where you learn something. (I-T JJ 12.10.3-4)

> (TC) takes time to make sure you understand what we're doing and there's just something about (TC)'s teaching that makes you want to learn...(TC) will congratulate you and praise you...Plus, (TC)'s classes are usually small and, therefore, you can get the extra attention you need....(TC)'s not one of those teachers that stay out...and when they come back they don't feel like teaching us. (I-T JP 12.15.7)

> (TC) and (TO) are concerned and willing to help you at any time...no hastle if you don't understand...they'll sit there and make you understand. (I-T JR 1.5.4)

> (TV) used to talk all the time. (TV) never got the point across. (TV) used to talk about things that went on in (TV)'s life...instead of talking about things that go on in the classroom and the subject (TV)'s supposed to be teaching us. (I-T JO 12.11.3)

> (TC) and (TE) are good because they're stern when they're teaching. They don't wander off into another topic of discussion. They stick to what they start off with. Whatever they talk about leads to something else. They're trying to relate it to something. (I-T JM 12.15.6)

As is clearly evident from the above sample comments, college prep students at Lincoln have a diversity of ideas and opinions with regard to teachers. The majority of these young people feel that teachers have a responsibility to be competent, to instruct them, and to abide by the general principles of respect and fairness. Further, they expect teachers to come to know

them and from this knowledge base to adapt and adjust to them and their individual needs. They, in turn, know that they must adapt and adjust to teachers. In addition, these students note a desire for an ordered environment as a precondition to learning at Lincoln. Moreover, while there are differing student definitions for order, there is agreement among the group that teachers, not other students, should manage and control classes and participants.

Summary

Lincoln High School exists to educate the young people who attend. In order to further this goal, order is necessary. The college prep students in this study are generally dedicated to both of these goals. Yet, many participants feel that an ordered environment, though necessary, has begun to take priority over the substantive material of education. Teachers, they feel, must get on with the job they are expected to do--teach, rather than spend mindless minutes creating a controlled atmosphere.

These students also note that curricula must relate directly to them, their values, their beliefs, their experiences, and their heritage. They want what is relevant for their future, not what is relevant in a teacher's past. They desire what education can afford them, an opportunity to become all they are capable of

becoming. This does not mean that these individuals are solely interested in acquiring some saleable skill which may become outmoded in a few years. These college prep students want to succeed, but on their own terms and despite their at-risk backgrounds. They do know what it takes and the majority are willing to make the effort, but they are keenly aware that trying hard and a positive attitude are, in themselves, false barometers of success. These students know and indicate that it takes inner drive, motivation, and self-discipline. In addition, they admit that it requires support and encouragement from others. Finally, these young people expect the adults around them, teachers in particular, to lead or to get out of their way because they have futures to form and lives to live. No, these are not what the some contemporary research studies call typical inner-city youngsters. They are different. As one adult at Lincoln stated, "They just have an inner drive that no matter what...they defy the odds and I don't know how they do it" (I-T AC 4.23.5).

REFERENCES

Clark, R. (1983). Family life and school achievement. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Geertz, C. (1973). The interpretation of cultures: Selected essays by Clifford Geertz. New York: Basic Books.

Mehan, H. & Wood, H. (1975). The reality of ethnomethodology. New York: John Wiley & Son.

Snider, W. (1986, December 3). 'Cultural relevance' stressed for public schools. Education Week. pp. 1, 16.

Wehlage, G. (1986). At-risk students and the need for high school reform. Education, 107(1), 18-28.